

Resurrection Clutter-Free
John 20:1-18

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Grace Episcopal Church
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There are many different characters in the Easter story, all of whom testify witness to the power and mystery of the resurrection, but of all the characters, perhaps none is more fascinating, more compelling, than the woman we know as Mary Magdalene. Most of you are probably familiar with her name, and yet, if I were to ask you to describe Mary Magdalene, to tell me what you know about her, I bet we would hear several varying depictions. That is because a lot things have been said about Mary over the years, a few of them pretty salacious, most of them just based upon conjecture and hearsay.

The Bible tells us Mary was an important follower of Jesus. She was not one of the twelve disciples, but she did have a significant role in the life and ministry of Jesus. Mary is named at least twelve times in the Gospels, more than most of the disciples, and unlike most of the disciples, she was with Jesus at the crucifixion. She was there when he died, able to stand with him in the midst of his suffering, not worried whether she might be caught by the Romans and end up on a cross herself.

Mary was there because Jesus meant that much to her. At one point in her life, she suffered from inner demons, and Jesus helped her, by casting out those demons and giving her a second chance at life. Mary was able to get back out in the world. She found meaning and purpose. Every day, she could wake up with a new attitude, believing in her heart that someone cared about her, knowing she had something to contribute, and it was all because of Jesus and what he did for her. From that moment on, Mary devoted herself to supporting Jesus, doing everything she could to make his ministry possible. But, when he died, all that died along with him.

So, on that first Easter Sunday, when Mary recognized the resurrected Jesus standing there in front of her, she threw her arms around him, all of the emotions from the last few days pouring out, as she squeezed tighter and tighter. It was not just Jesus she was grabbing on to – it was everything he meant to her. This was Mary's chance to reclaim what she lost. She was holding on to the way life was. She was holding on to her meaning and purpose. She was holding on to her identity and the very essence of her being. She was holding on and holding on and holding on, and she would not let go. There was no way she would let go.

And, who can blame her?

Ten years ago, my wife, our three boys and I moved into NYC so I could attend seminary. It was the first of three moves for us. As we all know, moving is incredibly disruptive and stressful. There is so much to do, so many details to manage and, it is difficult finding time to get it all done. It takes weeks to pack before the move, and weeks to unpack after the move. The

whole process dominates your life for months. But, moving is also an opportunity to declutter, to clean out some of those unused items which we are hidden away in the back corner of the closet, stored upstairs in the attic, or downstairs in the basement, where they are out of sight and so easily forgotten.

After three moves, you would think our family is pretty well de-cluttered, but you would be wrong. We are not even close. Somehow, it seems we have actually accumulated more stuff. Even though our boys are in college, we still have all of their stuffed animals and every trophy they won in t-ball. I have an old set of wooden golf clubs from the 1950's as if someday they are going to help me hit the ball farther. And, my wife still has her wedding dress, all nicely preserved and stored in this beautiful box. When I ask her about it, she tells me it's a girl thing, but after all these years of marriage, I feel like saying you ain't gonna need the baby anymore, and even if you did it is WAY out of style.

We all do that, though. We hold on to stuff. Like Mary Magdalene, we hold on to the past. Life is almost always in transition, keeping us off-kilter and off-balance. There is a sense of uncertainty about life, and so we like to hold on to the way things were as an anchor against the buffeting changes. The past tells us who we are and provides us with a sense of identity. When we are not happy with the direction our lives are going, we cling to the better times of yesterday to alleviate the pain of today. We even hold on to the bad stuff in life – the soured relationships, the ill feelings, the destructive behaviors – because we are more comfortable living with the devil we know than living a life we cannot envision.

I am not going to say it all needs to go. There are certain aspects of our life we should always carry with us: those people and places and moments through which we experienced love and joy and peace and an affirmation for who we are. We should cling to those things with every fiber of our being because those people embody the love of God; those places reveal the beauty of God's imagination; those moments are what constitute a life, making it all worthwhile. And, we also need to carry some of our hurt and pain and struggles with us. They, too, have value. Those experiences shape us and form us, and it is in our hurt and pain and struggle that we come closest to know Christ. We never want to give any of that up.

But too often, we fail to de-clutter our lives, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually. Instead, we carry that all this stuff around with us everywhere we go, through every stage of life. We accumulate more and more of it, hiding it in the back corners of our mind and in the dark recesses of our soul. We keep it in boxes with labels like guilt and bitterness and insecurity, frustration, anger, and envy. Most of the time, we forget the boxes are there, but they keep weighing on us and weighing on us, affecting our lives and relationships, in ways we don't always see or understand. We know we should get rid of some of this stuff, but we cannot bring ourselves to do it because it feels like we would be losing a part of ourselves, that part of us would be dying inside. So, we keep holding on to it and holding on to it and holding on to it... just like Mary Magdalene.

When Mary saw the resurrected Jesus outside the tomb, she thought everything would be the same again – life would be just as it was – but resurrection is not about going backward. Resurrection is about going forward. Life would never be the same again. God was doing

something new, something beyond description, something beyond comprehension. By raising Jesus, God was making life out of death, but to experience that, to experience the power of resurrection, Mary had to let go of her stuff. She couldn't keep it anymore. She couldn't hold on to it anymore, and that is what Jesus told her: "Do hold on to me," Jesus said.

His words still echo today. Our resurrection life awaits us. We may not know what it looks like. We may not know what the future holds, but we know Jesus is there, inviting us forward, calling us on to the life God offers, the life we all want to have. We just can't take our clutter with us. We can't hold on to it anymore.

Amen.